

A Look at Mintmarks: Part Two

Posted on 6/1/2004

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David Lange



As noted in the first part of this mintmark study (see *Numismatist* for June), beginning with the Barber silver coinage of 1892 an attempt was made by the U.S. Mint to standardize mintmark sizes and styles for each respective denomination. Ironically, despite its small size, the dime had the most space for a mintmark, and large puncheons were used. Mintmarks on the half dollar were slightly smaller, but they could still be described as large overall. The quarter dollar's mintmarks, however, were quite a bit smaller than for the other denominations.

Due to an error of planning on Barber's part, the quarter dollar did not have adequate space for a mintmark directly below the eagle's tail. On the earliest 1892 issues, the letters 'O' and 'S' are wedged awkwardly into this space. Such placement also led to chipping of the dies in this area. The second set of reverse dies, introduced later that year but used for some coins as late as 1897, had the mintmark placed far to the right. A compromise was achieved with the new delivery of dies in 1893, as these had the mintmark halfway between the extremes, where it remained through the end of the series.

Contemporary gold coins employed the same mintmark puncheons used for the silver issues, to which were added two letter 'D' puncheons upon the opening of the new Denver Mint in 1906. It was in that same year Congress finally authorized the striking of minor coins (cents and nickels) at the branch mints and provided funding for their purchases of base metals. This option was not exercised until 1908, when the San Francisco Mint began coining cents that bore the quarter dollar's 'S' mintmark.

The introduction of the Lincoln cent in 1909 prompted the creation of a new puncheon that was much smaller than any 'S' mintmark in use at the time. This is the tiny, symmetrical 'S' so familiar to those of us who must routinely authenticate 1909-S V.D.B. cents. It features a small notch, or hollow, within the upper serif. While the silver coins retained their existing "Barber" mintmarks until the introduction of new designs in 1916, the cent's puncheon was quickly adapted to the gold coins and the five-cent piece, first coined at San Francisco in 1912. A new 'D' mintmark was likewise created for the first emission of Denver Mint cents in 1911, and it too soon found a place on the nickel and the gold coins.

The redesign of all three silver denominations in 1916 saw adoption of the tiny 'D' and 'S' mintmarks already in use on the gold and minor coins. This represents the U.S. Mint's first attempt at standardization of mintmarks across all denominations. It was soon determined, however, that these mintmarks were actually too small and subject to filling of the die, so they were replaced early in 1917. Most denominations coined that year at the branch mints are transitional, being known with both the old and new mintmarks.

The new 'D' was quite similar to the old, except that it was minutely larger and had a more rounded center, whereas the old puncheon had a slightly triangular center. The 'S' mintmark adopted that year for all denominations was noticeably larger than the one introduced in 1909 and was not symmetrical. Instead, its lower serif was tilted to the right. These distinctions, while subtle, are quite helpful to those attempting to authenticate 1909-S Lincoln cents and 1916-D dimes, both of which are quite often simulated by adding mintmarks to common Philadelphia Mint specimens. Usually, the later style of 'D' or 'S' mintmark is used for such alterations, when both issues were coined with the older style mintmarks.

As these mintmark puncheons wore out, they were replaced. The Small D of 1917-34 was succeeded by the Large D of 1934-79. The Small S of 1917-42 was replaced with several variants of a Large S beginning in 1941. These different style 'S' puncheons were employed alternately after 1941, and the overlapping use of these for many dates is beyond the scope of this study. The Large S cents, dimes, quarters and halves of 1928 remain a lone and unexplained occurrence, while the Micro S dime of 1945 resulted from the use of a puncheon intended exclusively for the Philippine coinage.

The rapid failure of new 'S' puncheons introduced in 1979 and again in 1981 evidently convinced the Mint's engravers that another method of marking the dies was needed. Beginning with the proof coinage of 1985, mintmarks were applied to the master die for each year, rather to the numerous working dies. This procedure was adopted for the circulating coinage in stages. Nickels through halves featured

master die mintmarks beginning in 1990, and the cents fell into line the following year. Of course, this means that there are now separate master dies for each mint, whereas previously just a single master die existed for each date and denomination. While collectors will still seek to own examples of each mint's production, they must live with the knowledge that every coin made since 1991 will have the same style of mintmark in the exact same location.

David W. Lange's column USA Coin Album appears monthly in Numismatist, the official publication of the American Numismatic Association.

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United States

John Maben Returns to the Rare

Posted on 6/1/2004

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Of Maben, NGC President Mark Salzberg remarks, "John is one of the most talented individuals I know. As a partner, his contributions were many, and he will be missed."

The entire staff at NGC, NCS and CGC will miss John and we wish him well.

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New Registry Functionality Coming in July

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If you are submitting NGC coins, they will be automatically verified and added to your set. You will see immediate confirmation of the addition of NGC coins. If you are submitting PCGS coins, you will be prompted to provide more information about the coins and your entries will be automatically forwarded to NGC for verification. Your PCGS coins will be verified usually within one business day and you will receive an email confirmation of approval.

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NGC Certifies Commemorative as "Specimen"

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Grant with Star Half Dollar Believed to be Unique

A Grant Centennial half dollar has been certified by NGC as a Specimen striking. An example of the variety having an incuse star in its obverse field, this Specimen coin is believed to be unique.

Issued in 1922 to celebrate the centennial of Ulysses S Grant's birth and to raise funds for a memorial, the Grant half dollar was accompanied by a gold dollar bearing the same design. The half dollars having an incuse star above the name GRANT were coined first, this feature then being ground off the master hub before a much larger mintage of halves lacking the star was produced. The net mintage for the star variety was just 4,250 pieces, and the Grant with star half dollar stands as the rarest issue in the U. S. commemorative series in uncirculated condition.

Grant Coins



Grant coin holder



The coin certified by NGC as Specimen-65 has not been previously reported. Four matte proofs were acknowledged by the late scholar Walter Breen, but this Specimen striking has a distinctive satin finish. It is fully struck in every small detail and displays highly raised rims, which features by themselves distinguish this coin from ordinary production pieces. In addition, however, the swirling die-polishing lines characteristic of this issue are particularly bold and fresh, the dies being entirely unworn. Further evidence that this coin was struck before the dies became worn is found in the absence of the prominent obverse die-clash marks

seen on the great majority of Grant with Star halves. Only the earliest strikings are free of this defect.

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Fax resumes in confidence to 941.360.2555 Attn: Anja Frazer or e-mail at afrazer@ngccoin.com.

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